

The Girls From N.U.U.D.

by [skin2279](#)

—*CAREFUL, STEPS coming up. Keep hold of my hand.*

—*Do I have a choice?*

—*And remember to keep your eyes closed!*

—*Don't worry, I can't see anybody. That means nobody can see me, right?*

Jana briefly rolled her eyes, but continued casually up the steps into the main entrance of the Confederacy embassy.

"Is everything OK?" asked the well-dressed man who was accompanying her and holding her hand.

"Sure," she replied, "we're fine." She held her other hand relaxed, seemingly empty. If one looked closely, one might see a vague shimmer extending from it into a human-sized shape next to her. But the dim evening light made it hard to see, and while Melinda's body camouflage didn't amount to *true* invisibility, it was good enough to get by. Just so long as nobody got close enough to actually bump into her.

They hoped.

"Two from UNESCO? This way, please." The doorman was polite as he looked over the invites, but Jana noted the tell-tale bulge of the holster at his hip.

—*OK team, where are you now?* This was Nicole, back in the control van parked discreetly on a street corner—nearby, but not too near.

—*We're in the main hall, with Eric. About to find a suitable spot to deploy.*

—*Understood.*

"Let's avoid the crowds, and work our way around to that alcove next to the canapé table, shall we?"

"You're the boss, ma'am."

—*OK, Mel, we're in a dimly-lit alcove. You can open your eyes now.*

In the dimness next to the couple, a seemingly-disembodied pair of eyes appeared, floating in mid-air, near the top of the nearly-invisible shimmering mass. They turned, around, surveying the area.

—Where does that doorway lead? Nicole?

—That goes to a passageway connecting to some ground-floor offices. Worth a look. I'll have to guide you past the cameras and IR.

—OK, wish me luck. The eyes floated their way towards the doorway, which opened, seemingly by itself, to reveal a further dimness beyond; they went through, and it closed after them.

“Eric?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s our bit done for now. Let’s go make ourselves sociable, shall we?”



MELINDA KEPT herself pressed against the wall of the passage. —Where to now?

—The passage is clear—no cameras. But there are infrared detectors inside the offices. The closest one belongs to Ambassador Blentner’s secretary.

—The one he’s been having an affair with?

—You think Mrs Blentner doesn’t know?

—Maybe she doesn’t want to know... Never mind. I’ll go take a look.

—Don’t forget to switch to containment mode, there’s a good girl.

Melinda turned off her invisibility mode. Her bare skin now switched to an almost perfectly mirror-reflective surface. This not only kept light (including the nearby infrared and ultraviolet wavelengths) out, but kept it in as well, so that she would not trigger infrared motion detectors.

—OK, I’m in the secretary’s office.

—The door to the inner office isn’t alarmed. You just have to unlock it.

—Any ideas?

—Mmm ... try the drawers.

—I’m feeling a bit warm.

—Understood. Take your time, but stay only as long as you can.

—Bingo!

—Which drawer?

—Top-left, would you believe. First one I tried!

—OK, open the door, and crouch down. You're out of range of any detectors there. You can rest for a bit.

Melinda bent down low, and turned off her mirror-coating. Her bare skin was now flushed and hot, as though she were running a fever. She panted for a moment, to try to lose heat a little more quickly. Now was one of those times she wished she could sweat.



“How ARE they doing?”

Nicole looked up from the status displays. “Mel’s about to enter Blentner’s inner office. She’s taking a moment to cool off. Jana and Eric are mingling.”

“Any guards about?”

Nicole tapped a few buttons on her keyboard. “The night watch will only be coming past once an hour. Next visit in ... forty minutes.”

Karl brought over a hot cup of coffee to the desk where Nicole sat with her legs up.

“Thanks,” she said. She wrapped the toes of her right foot around the handle and picked it up with the casual skill of long practice. It helped that her toes were unusually long, almost long enough to be mistaken for fingers. She leaned forward and took a long, slow swallow. “Ah, that gets the old bodily fluids moving again.”

—There’s some kind of control panel here, next to me.

“Hang on, it’s Mel.” —Does it connect to the security system?

—Containment mode reengaged. I’m taking a look.

“What has she found?”

—Yes! It’s the patch panel for the cameras and IR!

“It’s a hookup for the security system—” —Can you patch us in?

—I can try...

Nicole’s finger-toes flew across the keys. *—I’ve started a scan from this end.*

—I can see your scan! Let me just try a bypass ... OK, the routing should be open now.

There was a flash on the status display. Nicole’s face lit up in excitement. *—We’re in!*

“What’s happening?” Karl asked.

Nicole turned to him. “Sorry—we’ve hooked into the security system!”

“The more time I spend with you girls,” Karl said, slowly, “the more I wish I could subvoc.”



“I FEEL HOT in here,” Jana said.

Eric surveyed the thin straps of the top of her dress, that barely concealed her breasts. “You’re wearing hardly anything,” he replied.

“I know, but you know it’s still too much. There’s a pool out back, and I see some guests drifting that way. Let’s follow them.”

“You’re not planning to go for a swim, are you?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

The cool outside air, with its hint of a winter not quite gone, would have made anyone else in the flimsy dress that Jana was wearing shiver. But she breathed deeply and enthusiastically. “We still have trouble keeping cool,” she said.

“Well, you look pretty—”

—*We’re getting pictures.*

“What is it?”

In a low voice: “We’ve hooked into the security cameras. Just act normal.” Somehow, Jana’s shoes had disappeared. She sat down on the edge of the pool, so she could dangle her bare feet in the water. In this weather, nobody else seemed keen to come into contact with the pool contents.



MEL TURNED ON the room lights. With the alarms bypassed and all the detection systems under their control, the need for caution was lessened.

—*One naked woman visible on monitor, check.*

Mel glanced up at the ceiling-mounted camera, and gave a wry smile. —*What am I looking for?*

—*The lab complex should be behind the office.*

—*I don’t see any doorway. Just shelves of books all along that wall. Hang on...*

—*What is it?*

—*You know how a shelf of books is never arranged completely tidily? No matter how careful you are? Well, there’s this one section where everything is perfectly in order...*

—*A fake bookcase? A secret entrance! You know what to do.*

—*Yeah, try and find the magic book that opens the door. Where do I start? I know...*

After about a minute, the bookcase slowly swivelled back, revealing a well-lit corridor beyond.

—*How did you guess?*

—*Well, I just thought—he would probably want to keep it secret from even his own outer-level security staff. So which books would be hidden when you turn your back to the camera? That narrowed it down a lot.*

—*Bright girl. I'll see they keep you on.*



“I GET FRUSTRATED sometimes, just watching,” said Nicole.

Karl came up and laid a hand gently on her shoulder. “You’re an important part of the team.”

“An important *handicapped* part of the team.” She wobbled her little arm-stumps. “Every time I wake up in the morning, it hits me again; my hands and arms are gone.”

“You’ve adapted very well.” Karl gestured at Nicole’s feet on the desktop, that she used like hands.

“Yeah, our enhanced bodies are pretty flexible.” She wiggled her finger-toes and watched them change in length from toe-like to finger-like and back again. “That’s one consolation, I guess.”

—*I’ve found Doctor Hong.*

Nicole sat bolt upright. “She’s found the Doctor!” she exclaimed. —*Jana, we have the target. Be ready! Mel, how is he?*

—*Asleep, or maybe unconscious.*

—*OK, try to revive him. And try not to startle him, won’t you?*

—*Oh, yeah. Some casual evening wear, coming up.*



MEL SURVEYED HER bare skin, and gave a momentary frown of concentration. Its texture began to change around her torso and thighs, becoming rougher and thicker. The colour changed, too. And within a minute, she gave all the appearance of wearing a light white cotton T-shirt and blue denim shorts. She looked over her bare feet, and then they began to change too, a thick layer forming on the undersides like the soles of shoes, extruding into slender high heels at the rear. *That should do*, she thought.

She stepped forward to the cage where the figure of the kidnapped scientist lay on a cot, seemingly inert. The key wasn't hard to find, in a filing cabinet nearby. (*Gee, have these people ever heard of security?*, she wondered.) She entered the cage, and gently touched the man's shoulder. "Doctor Hong?" she ventured, in a low voice.

The figure groaned. His eyes fluttered open, giving her a look of sadness and despair. Which immediately gave way to shock, and he sat up suddenly, and then seemed to regret it. "Who are you?" he demanded, holding his head.

"I'm a friend," Mel replied. "We're here to rescue you. Can you walk?"

"I ... I think so. I think I've been drugged."

"Yeah, that figures. Don't worry, I'm stronger than I look. You can lean on me."

"And what's going on here?"

Mel turned around with a start. It was Ambassador Blentner, together with the guard from the front door. The guard had his gun in his hand.

—*Uh-oh, I've been spotted.* Aloud, piling on as much breathless enthusiasm as she could muster: "Ambassador ... Blentner, is it? I've wanted so much to meet you, for such a long time—"

"Enough!" Blentner cut her off. "Who are you and how did you get in here?"

—*Trouble?*

—*I think I can handle it. I just need a distraction.*

—*One distraction, coming up.*

Mel discreetly increased the stiffness of the outer layer around her toes, until it was as hard as steel. "Why, I'm just an admirer of yours," Mel gushed. "Quite an impressive lab setup you have here. Is this one of your human subjects?" She indicated Doctor Hong.

Just as the guard made a move towards her, the fire alarm and sprinklers both triggered. Mel gave one kick, smashing the man's hand and knocking the gun out of it, followed by another kick to his head, which dropped him to the floor. The Ambassador backed away fearfully, hands in front of his face.

—*Thanks, Nicole. We're clear.* And just as suddenly as they started, the alarms went silent and the sprinklers stopped sprinkling. Mel helped the Doctor out of his cage, giving one last disgusted look at the cowering Ambassador before taking his former prisoner out of the lab.



"THEY'RE COMING OUT."

Eric glanced around. There was nobody near them by the pool. “Which way?”

“We stay here, and provide a diversion. Here goes.” And without any further preamble, Jana leaned forward and fell into the water.

Eric yelled. “She’s fallen in! Help, somebody! She can’t swim!”

The sound of a helicopter became audible in the distance. A number of burly uniformed men appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and converged on Eric.

He danced about agitatedly, pointing into the unbroken surface of the pool, Jana nowhere in sight. “I think she had too much to drink. Get her out, somebody!”

One of the men hesitated, then jumped into the water. Jana appeared on the surface a moment later, near the other end, thrashing about wildly and screaming, “Get away from me, you creep!” Then she went under again.

The helicopter sound was getting louder. One or two of the guards looked up curiously. The man in the water swam strongly to the point where Jana had appeared, but seemed to get into difficulties himself. He struggled for a few moments as something seemed to pull him down into the water. When he didn’t reappear, another couple of guards jumped in.

At that moment, Jana came up at the other side of the pool, holding the unconscious guard across her back. She chucked him onto the ground, then climbed out herself. Her outfit had disappeared, and she was in bare skin.

The helicopter, piloted by Karl, was right above the compound, and its noise was deafening. A door burst open at the back of the house, and Melinda appeared, leading Doctor Hong with his arm across her shoulders. The copter landed and they headed straight for it.

Eric looked towards Jana; she was running around the pool to deal with the remaining guards. The two who had joined their colleague in the water had got out again, but they were hampered by their wet clothes. Eric knocked them both out, then went to join Jana as she, too, headed for the copter.



FLECKS OF SUNLIGHT DANCED off the pool that adjoined the back patio of Creighton Hall. Nicole sat up on a deckchair while Jana rubbed an oily liniment from a glass dispenser onto her back. Melinda stood nearby, her bare skin gleaming, lifting up her hair as Karl touched a sensor wand to the bright silver interface disc that was revealed at the back of her head, at the base of the scalp. A cable ran from the wand to a laptop sitting on an outdoor table.

“Good morning!” came a cheery voice from the doorway. Then a sudden, startled “Oh!”.

“It’s OK, please come out, Doctor,” said Jana.

Doctor Hong came out hesitantly, a hand half over his eyes. “You ladies are ... in a state of undress ...”

Karl gave a chuckle. “Don’t mind them. They’re always like this.”

Melinda gave him a sharp nudge. “You know we *have* to be like this,” she hissed. Then, smiling at the Doctor, “I’m afraid we only wear clothes when we have to. You don’t mind, do you?”

“If you do not mind, then neither do I,” replied the Doctor. Then: “What exactly are you doing?”

“Maintenance,” explained Karl. “Checking skin and overall body condition, and the daily application of conditioning lotion. Essential ongoing work, since these women have undergone major reconstruction work after suffering a major accident.”

“The Neoderm treatment,” explained Jana. “Highly experimental, of course. We call ourselves ‘N.U.U.D.’—The Neoderm Upgrade Undercover Deployment.”

“That’s right,” went on Karl, “Their skins—and some other parts—are mostly artificial now. This gives them some interesting capabilities, such as the ability to reconfigure their extremities, alter stiffness and thermal conductivity, and even colour and texture. But one of the downsides is they no longer have sweat glands.”

“I see. The consequence of that being a major heat-removal problem. Quite understandable, then, that they try to shed needless insulation at every opportunity. Tell me—what, um, organization are you with?”

“Well, we’re kind of an unofficial international project,” replied Karl. “We get our funding through a little-known corner of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—UNESCO. Though there are some UN members who would like to put a stop to that—if they can ever figure out the necessary bureaucratic incantations to do so. You know what a tangled labyrinth the UN hierarchy can be.”

The Doctor nodded, smiling. “I assume that the Confederacy is among those who would like to shut you down. Am I right that last night was not your first, ah, disagreement with them?”

“You wonder why,” Melinda said, “if they hate the UN so much, why are they still a member?” Then, when Jana rolled her eyes: “What?”

“Because we have no official existence or legal power,” Karl went on, “we have to operate covertly. Like on projects where our targets themselves would be majorly embarrassed if our activities were revealed, so they have an incentive to keep quiet about it. At least, we hope so.”

“Well, I am certainly most grateful for your interventions.”

Her lotion application completed, Nicole stood up and turned around as Karl lifted her hair and touched the sensor wand to her interface disc.

The Doctor's eyebrows went up. "I'm sorry to see you have no arms," he said. "Was that a result of the same accident?"

"Yes it was," replied Nicole.

"And what is that disc at the back of your head?"

"It's a neural interface," replied Karl. "All three of them have it. We're still experimenting with what it can do. One thing is it gives them a low-power remote communication capability."

"Amazing."

"Eric will be along later in the morning to pick you up for your flight back home," added Karl. "In the meantime, would you like to join us for breakfast?" He pointed to a trolley next to the table with a bunch of dishes on it.

"That would be very welcome." Hong glanced hesitantly at Nicole. "Will you need help, young lady?"

"I can manage perfectly well, thank you," replied Nicole, seating herself at the table. She reached out a foot, toes already in their lengthened configuration, and picked up a slice of toast bread exactly as though between thumb and forefinger.

"Even more amazing. My apologies for doubting your abilities."

"Jana and I can also do that a bit," said Mel. "But not as well as she can."

"All in all, I'd rather have my arms back," said Nicole.

"We're working on that," said Karl. "Being able to reconfigure fingers and toes, even parts of hands and feet, is one thing, but..."

"Regenerating entire limbs is quite another matter," finished the Doctor. "One in which I have some expertise, as you might know. In the field of cybonic synthesis, working with ordinary flesh and blood has its challenges. But this—neoderms?—material you have here ... that opens up a whole new realm of possibilities." He seemed lost in thought for a moment.

"You should have a look around our lab before you leave," said Nicole.

"It's here?"

"Yup," replied Karl, waving his arms at the mansion. "Quite a bit of room for our activities, here at Creighton Hall. After we did some interior remodelling, of course."

"Not that you would know from the outside," commented the Doctor. "Such an elegant and pleasant setting."

"Would you like to work with us?" asked Jana. "Our own lab facilities can only go so far. We've

heard that yours have quite a reputation.”

The Doctor’s eyes were shining. “I thought you’d never ask!”

